

THE EUCHARIST- A SYSTEMATIC EXPOSITION AND EXPLANATION



**“SUCH A GREAT AND DIVINE
SACRAMENT, SUCH A SPLENDID AND
NOBLE MEDICINE, SUCH A PURE AND
SIMPLE SACRIFICE”¹. “OUR OPINION IS
IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE EUCHARIST,
AND THE EUCHARIST IN TURN
ESTABLISHES OUR OPINION”²**

¹ Augustine, Sermon 228b.1

² Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 4.18.5

Introduction

Jesus said of this Eucharistic bread and wine, "This is my body" and, "This is my blood". Jesus then commanded us to "do this in remembrance of"¹ Him. Paul described them as a "participation in" the body and blood of Christ². Jesus also said that "the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh"³. These are the basic facts of the Eucharist from Scripture; there is some kind of identity between the Eucharist and the body and blood of Christ. Before investigating the Eucharist, it is good to think about how we cannot talk about the Eucharist. The mode by which we should investigate the Eucharist is one of both faith and mystery.

That the Eucharist is the body and blood of Christ is a matter of faith that we cannot deny. The saying "This is my body" "is of itself sufficient to give you full assurance about the divine mysteries"⁴ that the Eucharist is the body and blood of Christ; "will anyone still dare to doubt?... who will ever waver?". The word of Christ, which Paul "received from the Lord and also handed on to you"⁵, is the source of our Eucharistic faith. So is the statement that "my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them" (and similar statements in the surrounding passage). Because of this statement by Christ, "it is no longer permitted us to raise doubts about the true nature of the body and the blood, for this is indeed flesh and blood"⁶. This means that to doubt the Eucharist is to go against Christ himself, so "they... who do not confess this gift of God die in their disputing"⁷. Denying the life and holiness given to us in the Eucharist in a free and gratuitous way shuts us off to the grace of God leads to our death; this theme will be expanded on later. The statement of the Eucharist was also a command to believe in it. By denying the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, we act in a forbidden way against Christ. Accordingly, we accept the Eucharist because it is a doctrine of faith. This excludes all natural or philosophical proofs as to whether the Eucharist really is the body and blood of Christ.

Conversely, although the Eucharist must be accepted, the Eucharist is a mystery. Specifically, the manner in which the Eucharist is the body and blood of Christ, and the process by which it becomes this is a mystery. John of Damascus said that the only response to those who "ask how the bread becomes the body of Christ" is that God "works... things which are beyond description and understanding"⁸ and "the manner in which it is so is impossible to find out"⁹. We can reason to this because the process of the Eucharistic change has no parallel in our ordinary experience, and these "mysteries... are above all

¹ Luke 22:19, 1 Corinthians 11:24

² 1 Corinthians 10:16

³ John 6:51

⁴ Cyril, *Mysteries* 4.1

⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:23

⁶ Hilary, *Trinity*, 8.14

⁷ Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans*, 7.1. Schoedel, *Commentary*, 240- "The argument presupposes that he could count on wide agreement... with a realistic doctrine of the presence of Christ in the elements of the eucharist". Ibid, n.8- "The verb "confess"... seems to have a... technical significance in our passage and to refer to the affirmation of true doctrine". The former is a consensus position, but Klawiter, *Eucharist and Sacramental Realism*, (particularly 148-151) argues against it. Whether or not we can know Ignatius' position on the real presence is irrelevant for the wider discussion of the Eucharistic presence because there are many other dogmatic sources which certainly discuss this presence and we do not rely on Ignatius for proving this. What we certainly learn from Ignatius is that denying the Eucharist, which we will investigate later, is heresy.

⁸ John of Damascus, *Exposition* 4.13.5

⁹ Ibid, 4.13.7

things”¹ , so trying to give a mechanistic account of it using either natural science or metaphysics is impossible. We cannot have a perceptual intuition of the Eucharist. The Eucharistic presence is so different from the normal presence of a body in space, which also seems like a fundamental concept that we cannot really find a deeper explanation for. So, it is beyond description and understanding. The question, “How does the bread become the body of Christ?”² , is a frequent one that we naturally desire to ask and should expect people to ask at first, but any answer is limited by our lack of understanding.

This does not mean, however, that we cannot investigate the Eucharist at all. Firstly, we can describe the Eucharistic change by analogy because, as Hilary says in his discussion of the Eucharist, an “illustration is adapted to the nature of our understanding in order that we may grasp the matter under discussion by means of the example that is set before us”³ . It is “not amiss to say”⁴ an analogy to the Eucharist by giving an example from our ordinary lives so that, while never completely understanding or describing the Eucharist, we can come closer to grasping it. Our weak understanding prevents us from finding out the whole manner of the Eucharistic change, but we should also avoid having to receive the Eucharist in an irrational way, so we can make some attempt using our understanding to illustrate the Eucharist. At the same time, the full spiritual work of God in the Eucharist is adapted to our limited understanding; otherwise, we would not grasp the Eucharist at all and it would be meaningless. We can also reason about how the Eucharist relates to other doctrines, and what the effects of the Eucharist are, what its status is, and what the Eucharist is not.

Furthermore, Balthasar elucidates this by saying that “what is important is not that we know how God does it, but that we know that and why he does it... no human hypotheses which presses in from the side-lines should be allowed to obscure the total image”⁵ of Eucharistic theology. Although we cannot know how it is, what mechanism is used, by knowing that the Eucharist is the body and blood of Christ we are prompted to investigate further what exactly this ‘thatness’ of the Eucharist is. It will still be important to understand the ontological implications of the Eucharist; what kind of union is in the Eucharist, and what this means for our interaction with it and how it is appropriate to describe the union. This will be an understanding of the results of the Eucharistic process, which is distinct from the causes and actions which go into it. Knowing the reasons for the Eucharist will also illuminate its final end and purpose.

Therefore, faith is needed to have any understanding of the Eucharist. “Faith is... the conviction of things not seen”⁶, and we cannot see the Eucharistic change naturally because it is a mystery. As Cyril of Jerusalem instructs, the faithful should “let faith be [their] stay instead of judging the matter by taste”⁷ ⁸. This means that an investigation of the Eucharist is essentially the domain of theology, while philosophy and other subjects can only support in an incidental way. The fact of the identity of the Eucharist with the body and blood of Christ, and of God’s work in the Eucharist, is completely an object of faith which cannot be approached by natural reasoning. Because the Eucharist is a mystery, it is simply

¹ Chrysostom in Matthew 71

² cf. “How can bread be his body?” (Augustine, Sermon 272), “How [is it] true flesh?” (Ambrose, Sacraments 6.1)

³ Hilary, Trinity, 8.16

⁴ John of Damascus, Exposition, 4.13.7

⁵ Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, 575

⁶ Hebrews 11:1

⁷ Cyril, Mysteries 4.6

⁸ As Augustine explains, only “the faithful can recognize the sacrament” (Sermon 131.1) so “the faithful know what they receive” (Sermon 5.7) while even “the catechumens don’t know” (Sermon 232.7).

recognised and known for what it is; known but never fully understood. The Eucharist, to the extent that it can be understood, is understood and known by the spiritual rather than physical senses. In baptism, we are “born again¹... and can see that [Eucharistic] food and drink... in a new light”² with faith and should “look at it with the eyes of the mind”³ .

These “eyes of the mind” or “eyes of faith” in patristic teaching really should be thought of as “another set of eyes... another faculty of sight, that of the soul”⁴ , “a variety of mental images and visual processes... [that] generate a host of mental images”⁵ . Firstly, this spiritual sense is a separate faculty from the physical senses; it is not just a metaphor for the intellect and the assurance given by faith from the statements of Jesus. At the same time, it interacts with these physical senses. The physical senses are valid, but continually work against and should give way to the spiritual sense which knows that the Eucharist is the body of Christ⁶ . “One thing is to be seen; another is to be understood”⁷ ; how does the spiritual sense work to make us understand? Based on our knowledge from faith about the Eucharist, it creates an alternate (but true) reality in the imagination and apply it to the physical perception of the Eucharist. By this, we “reframe the physical perception of the Eucharist”⁸, and create an understanding of it rather than just physical sense perceptions so that then we recognise it for what it is. It is important to note that, despite the analogy, this is not a direct perception of how the Eucharistic change comes about that could then be described. If the Eucharist is a true mystery, then the spiritual senses cannot, like with physical objects⁹, seize on and focus on the spiritual reality of the Eucharist as the start of the mental process of recognising the Eucharist. Instead, this role in perception is taken up by faith, which then allows us to seize on the reality of the Eucharist by framing our perception of it. Faith, which precedes and is superior to our perception of the bread and wine, creates a new kind of space for the Eucharist when it reframes physical perception, and the corresponding spiritual intuition resulting from this is a “formal constitution for... acquiring immediate representation, intuition of”¹⁰ the true nature of the Eucharist. Only then can we be concretely aware of the Eucharist appearing to and posited for us instead of it just being perceptually there¹¹. This is truly a different way of perceiving that has its origins in faith and mental images rather than the ‘eyes of the body’.

¹ Cf. John 3:5

² Augustine, Sermon 228b.1

³ Chrysostom in Matthew 82.4

⁴ Frank, *Taste and See*, 620. See p.626 for a description of Origen’s understanding of this sense.

⁵ Ibid, 621

⁶ Ibid, 627-8- “Cyril validated the physical sensorium, even as he subordinated it to a spiritual one... he counteracted taste with a series of mental images, each with an ontological reality to rival that of physical taste”

⁷ Augustine, Sermon 272

⁸ Frank, *Taste and See*, 621

⁹ Husserl (Koester), *Ideas I*, 70- “In perceiving proper, as an attentive perceiving, I am turned toward the object... The seizing-upon is a singling out and seizing; anything perceived has an experiential background... also “perceived” in a certain manner, perceptually there... Every perception of a physical thing has, in this manner, a halo of background-intuitions”. When we ‘seize upon’ the Eucharist using this sense of faith, the background of the physical bread and wine is left behind and not seized upon.

¹⁰ Kant (Guyer), *Critique of Pure Reason*, B41, answering the question about how spatial cognition is possible; “How can an outer intuition inhabit the mind that precedes the objects themselves, and in which the concept of the latter can be determined a priori?”.

¹¹ Only “perceptually there” for the spiritual sense because it is only understood in the abstract propositions of faith, or for the physical senses because it is just viewed as mere bread and wine. Although physical objects are unique in having an experiential background like this, we can still try to talk about this with regard to spiritual things analogically.

Although the Eucharist is in the end a mystery, Augustine introduces his explanation of the Eucharist by saying that “you ought to know what you have received [in the Eucharist], what you are about to receive, what you ought to receive”¹. It would be a shame if our past experiences of receiving the Eucharist were not enriched by clear knowledge, if we came to receive the Eucharist without truly seeing what it is, or if we made a habit of receiving the Eucharist but not having the wisdom to come truly close to it. To rectify this lack of knowledge, “your faith asks to be instructed about”² the nature of the Eucharist because of its desire for this instruction, but at the same time our understanding of the Eucharist is limited by mystery so understanding can never be complete and this desire is always frustrated. We are challenged because “There you have it all; I said it in a moment. But you must weigh the words, don’t count them. If you count the words, it’s short enough; if you weigh them, it’s tremendous”³ because faith desires instruction to understand the Eucharist although the assurance of faith comes first. If our investigation of the Eucharist is simply a list of authoritative statements about it from scripture and other sources of doctrine, then it is no more than a dead repetition of formulas that takes no meaningful time in the sense that there is no effort of thinking done. Faith begins with these propositions, but it is not enough for understanding a mystery as far as we can. Although the Eucharist is a mystery, it is not limited to the plain statements. “Faith [in the Eucharist] desires instruction”⁴ because this is how faith flourishes, and this instruction is a personal activity of growth and fulfilling our desire for understanding rather than a mere formalism that has no meaning for each and every faithful person. A command is given to believe in the Eucharist by faith, and this is responded to by instruction. We still have the task of giving instruction about the Eucharist so that people, subjective and historically-limited individuals who are therefore ever-new in their understanding, understand the abstract propositions of the old and unchanging faith from the scriptures. The ever-present challenge to theologians explaining the Eucharist is that we need to have “confronted and reconciled powerful if conflicting sense impressions [and]... rescued the Eucharist from... doubts and disappointments”⁵.

In conclusion, philosophy cannot play a part in deciding what the Eucharistic doctrine should be. This is because of our limited understanding of the manner of the Eucharistic change and presence. Instead, the doctrine of the scriptures as explained by theological reflection from tradition and other sources, should drive and be the foundation for all arguments in Eucharistic theology. However, so that Eucharistic theology is instructive to understanding, philosophy and human reasoning must also play a role. In relation to other concepts, we must find an acceptable way to speak about the Eucharist, even though, when considered in itself, we cannot have an understanding or description of how it works. Many terms used to describe the Eucharist, such as “body” and “sign” require significant explanation from philosophy. Dogmatic theology shows how to speak about the Eucharist, and philosophical theology shows how to think about it. When analogies are used to describe the Eucharist, then we are actually being invited to fully explore them using our own reasoning and come closer to grasping the Eucharist. So, we should bring out the full meaning of these concepts as much as possible so that their implications can be understood properly. In this way, the consequences of the doctrine of the Eucharist can be understood without rationalising or reducing a mystery. Eucharistic theology also cannot be a set of disconnected propositions about the Eucharist. Instead, all of these statements should flow from the basic description

¹ Augustine, Sermon 227

² Augustine, Sermon 272

³ Augustine, Sermon 229A.1. Sermon 272- “it took no time to say that [the bread of the Eucharist is the body Christ etc.] indeed, and that, perhaps, may be enough for faith, but faith desires instruction”

⁴ Augustine, Sermon 272

⁵ Frank, *Taste and See*, 621. Even “Ambrose, like any catechist... had a lot of explaining to do” (620)

of the Eucharist: "this is my body". Reasoning is needed to make synoptic links between different ideas about the Eucharist, and the contributions of modern theologians are also sometimes useful for making these links. It is only when they are connected into a coherent whole that Eucharistic theology is instructive because then it gives understanding of a systematic theology which can be grasped.

Good Eucharistic theology will also relate the Eucharist to other doctrines (such as the Trinity and Incarnation). The Eucharist is not an incidental, discrete or isolated part of church practice that can be cast aside for more central doctrines of theology. Instead, we believe in it "according to the statement of the Lord Himself as well as our faith"¹. It is also not as if we can cast aside the Eucharist for a more essentially Christian doctrine; it needs to be framed within and around the rest of Christian theology. As Balthasar describes, "the sacraments are an essential part of ecclesial aesthetics.... but the sacraments would be radically misunderstood if one attempted in the least way to disjoin them from the Christ-form as "instrumenta separata" [a separate instrument] and ascribe to them an independent meaning and a form of their own"². The Eucharist is always present for us and so often the accessible centre in Church life. However, it is easy to be confused about it because of its familiarity, and how preoccupied we are with ritual and personal actions. When we do not know what we receive in the Eucharist, it becomes an accidental ritual to the Church with a merely social or formal function. The Eucharist is part of the aesthetics of the Church in so far as it is connected to Christ; otherwise, it becomes a merely human image and activity and the sacraments would lose their mystery. The meaning of the sacraments is also entirely grounded in that which comes from Christ. So, there is an interplay between the essential need for and centrality of the Eucharist in the faith, and the dangers of viewing them as separate and isolated. If the Eucharist is an isolated and discrete field of theology, then it also risks becoming viewed as unnecessary for and accidental to the rest of theology. Meanwhile, Eucharistic theology should not be entirely subjected to the Christology and soteriology which it depends on for its meaning. This is resolved by recognising that the sacraments are one mode of engaging with the faith, a living mode in contrast with the propositional facts of salvation. Both of these are necessary. This further involves a constructive approach to Eucharistic theology which links between the Eucharist and other doctrines.

We could also ask why, unlike with the Trinity and Incarnation, there is no standard definition of the Eucharist from the ecumenical councils. The answer to this is fairly simple: "the absence of references may seem surprising... [but] the eucharist was not the subject of controversy in this period and there was no pressing reason for it to appear in the decrees of the ecumenical councils"³. This means that there is no single formula that can define the Eucharistic presence for us, and which Eucharistic doctrine could be shaped around. It will not be obvious or necessary to point out which views of the Eucharist are heresy for us and which are within acceptable limits for orthodoxy. Although there may be views which are dangerous or false, a degree of leniency and cooperative spirit is also called for. Perhaps for similar reasons, the Church Fathers did not produce any one treatise on the Eucharist, but mentioned it many times in places scattered across works. As well as being impersonal, simply listing quotes would be (lazy) history and not really theology at all. In the natural desire of the faithful to understand the Eucharist, it is inevitable that the human mind will

¹ Hilary, Trinity, 8.14

² Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, 582

³ Tanner, *The Eucharist in the Ecumenical Councils*, 40. Ibid, 38- "most of the councils were called principally to meet particular doctrinal controversies and a full treatment of the eucharist cannot be expected from each of them"

apply its own understanding of relevant philosophical concepts and understand statements about the Eucharist in the context of each other. All this should be done while never attempting to direct or begin the argument structure of Eucharistic theology with our own reasoning instead of faith coming first, or attempting to explain in direct terms the manner of God's work in the Eucharist.